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Cary Nelson

The Future of Faculty Unionization

I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. At campuses across the country jackbooted university managers have trod all over faculty rights for a decade. Shared governance is at best the object of administrative contempt. Faculty control over the curriculum is whittled away by online degrees designed by bureaucrats. Academic freedom is simultaneously compromised by policies for e-mail use and campus servers and threatened by continuous right-wing assaults from outside the university. Independent faculty research in science, engineering, and agriculture is increasingly undermined by reliance on product-oriented commercial support. Tolerance for "unprofitable" humanities and social science research is on the wane. And the burgeoning class of contingent faculty without health care, retirement plans, due process, job security, or true academic freedom makes college teaching a new form of wage slavery.

Unfortunately, the faculty as a whole has one foot in the cradle and one in the grave. It is generationally divided between those too young to know any better and those waiting to retire. They all need to buy good union-made shoes and organize. The only cohorts that justify hope are those union activists with a broader social vision, including veterans of the graduate employee organizing movement, the core of dedicated but aging AAUP members, and those faculty scattered across the country who combine realism with activism. Without fundamental changes in faculty attitudes and ambitions, the kind of higher education we know will not long survive, except to some degree at the wealthiest institutions.

Despite all the trends that give clear warnings, many faculty are simply hoping for the best. Faculty members regularly point to their handbooks as guarantees of tenure, due process, and shared governance. As anyone seriously involved in collective bargaining knows well, handbook provisions in many states aren't worth much unless they are mirrored in a legally enforceable contract. Though the contractual status of handbook provisions varies from state to state, there is often very little reassuring case law bearing on the issue. Overall, there is little warrant for relying on handbook guarantees. As events in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina should have taught all of us, faculty handbooks can be tossed aside under the right conditions. Nor does it take a natural disaster for some administrations to revise them unilaterally.

When I wake up each morning and put on my own shoes, I keep wondering if this is the day I'll be walking

arm-in-arm in solidarity with my colleagues. I believe that public higher education is ripe for a new wave of collective bargaining campaigns. I believe faculty at private institutions will some day declare the *Yeshiva* decision irrelevant and seize the power inherent in numbers. Exactly when the tipping point will come I cannot say, but history suggests that worsening conditions eventually produce resistance. The other shoe will drop. Exploitation will engender organization.

Are we ready for that day? Do we have unions that can hail faculty frustrated by a university mission they no longer recognize? Do we have unions that can simultaneously invoke practicality and idealism? Do we have unions that can overcome the antagonism toward collective bargaining widespread in American culture and perilously articulated to faculty belief in their independence and individuality? Is there any chance the public would admire us in the wake of a new wave of faculty unionization? What sort of unionization would enhance our status in the public eye?

Devotion to academic freedom and shared governance, founding staples of AAUP collective bargaining, are essential components of faculty unions worthy of both our own devotion and public support. But much education will be required before the public either understands or endorses these values. Just turning faculty into articulate defenders of academic freedom and committed participants in shared governance is a considerable task. If a faculty union were to approach the average new assistant professor with a call to join up and help strengthen shared governance, the most likely response would be "what is shared governance?"

Getting the public to understand academic freedom is a still more daunting goal. It would require sufficient resources to produce and place radio and television spots explaining key elements of the concept. Meanwhile, unions need to recover their historic devotion to the public good if they are to refurbish their image. What better place to do that than a college or university campus? What better place to harness student idealism to the faculty capacity for articulate advocacy?

We might begin by turning the campus itself into a workplace laboratory for social justice. Let's help organize our weakest brothers and sisters on campus, from contingent faculty and graduate employees, to secretaries and cafeteria workers. A faculty union should make universal workplace justice its first priority. The AFT faculty union at Eastern Illinois University includes contingent faculty teaching 50% time or more in the bargaining unit. The full-time faculty made their contingent colleagues their first priority in their 2006 contract negotiations, winning them higher salary increases and the possibility of multi-year contracts. This wasn't easy. Some tenured faculty and

administrators objected. Yet everyone I have talked with since--both faculty and administrators--are now proud of the results.

Tenured faculty should insist that all workers have health care, a living wage, and due process rights; insist that all students from poor and lower middle class families receive a free college education; insist that the huge gap between the highest paid administrators and the teachers on the line be closed. They can then turn outward and demand the same commitments from local industry and local government. A faculty union should be a force galvanizing community commitment to a better life for all. It should be a source of public inspiration and solidarity.

We all know how many Americans now regard unions as little more than group efforts to harness greed and avoid work. Worse still, many union members themselves lack an understanding of their larger cultural role. Thus many vote against their economic and political self-interest in national elections. In the 2004 presidential election some national guard members who voted for George Bush have no doubt since paid with their lives in Iraq. Across the United States I have no doubt that some union members who decided the risks from gay marriage were greater than the risks from lax enforcement of workplace safety rules voted for George Bush and paid with their lives. Others simply lost their pensions or their health care, as Bush-appointed judges decided that hard-won provisions applied to the life of the contract, not the life of the employee.

Fear of collective action--revulsion at the thought of having their imperial, transcendent individual agency smothered in mob rule--is the faculty version of horror at gay marriage, a form of false consciousness learned at the cradle of the academy. It is part of the ideology that grew out of the identification of communism with fascism that was installed in faculty culture in the 1950s, when it seemed to some that all mass consciousness was demonic. My hope is that our message--faculty are losing power over the curriculum, watching institutional mission morph from education into job training, watching administrative positions multiply like triffids and their attendant salaries soar, and seeing the teaching profession reduced to the academic equivalent of fast-food employment--will lead faculty to realize that their self-interest does not reside in group impotence.

Far more than bread-and-butter is disappearing from the university table. Self-interest at some point mandates that faculty opt for the only kind of agency--collective agency--that can enforce shared governance principles, contractually restrict the use of contingent labor in the classroom, enforce due process, and--finally--reverse the flow of power from the faculty to the administration eroding the faculty role over a generation.

For more than a decade Stanley Aronowitz has been arguing that faculty unions need to get more involved

in campus governance. He has also urged unions to take on a broader social mission. As he wrote at the end of his 1997 essay "Academic Unionism and the Future of Higher Education," "unions are now faced with the awesome task of becoming institutions of alternative as well as resistance. In short, they are challenged to accept responsibility for the academic system rather than remaining representatives of specific interests of faculty and staff within its technocratically defined boundaries. The challenge is to become agents of a new educational imagination" (213). I really do not think there is a choice. The workplace issues for faculty now involve rapacious redefinition of the fundamental character of higher education and the role of the faculty. The nature of the job is changing--and not for the good. When only one faculty member holds the last good job in America the job will not matter. The last tenured faculty member in the United States will not possess academic freedom.

Yet even an AAUP-style union that embraces shared governance in all its aspects cannot win public admiration, let alone hail young faculty, students, and staff. If faculty self-interest writ large and small are equally imperiled, they cannot be repaired by anything less than a redefinition of faculty identity. We need to encourage models of faculty identity that combine careerism with social responsibility. We need to encourage faculty to realize their lives are not complete, their identities not whole, unless their personal ambitions are matched by community commitment. We need a notion of community that is actually empowered by faculty advocacy.

Faculty collective bargaining must be at the center of this project. Faculty collective bargaining needs to lead the effort to reverse both these trends and restore unionization's progressive ambitions and its utopian heart. To say that this call will fall on deaf ears is more than an understatement; it's not clear faculty have the social ears to hear this challenge. Certainly there are precious few faculty leaders in CB working toward this goal, save perhaps those who have been part of city-wide living wage campaigns. So it's not as if I can claim I'm speaking to an incipient yearning in the hearts of faculty unionists.

Indeed the course of faculty unionism on many campuses has been in the opposite direction. Far too many locals have never replaced the dynamic leaders who founded CB chapters in the 1970s. A disturbing number of locals have lost the organizing impulse and let their memberships drift near or into minority representation. Only the reluctance of their enemies to take on the battle protects them from decertification challenges. Here and there local ideology has grown corrupt or jaded. Moldy bread and spoiled butter dominate the issues of the day, as when members of a tenured faculty union become convinced that every dollar granted part-time teachers is a dollar lost to them; as when members of a tenured faculty union do not care whether their contingent colleagues have health care

or a living wage.

But I'm not sure a vulnerable union near minority membership is the least inspiring state for a campus. At least that sort of local broadcasts a message of weakness that calls for change. After three decades of union activism and visits with still more local CB leaders over the last two years, I have a different model for my image of a worst-case local--one that is fat and happy with a faculty that is deaf, dumb, and blind.

While I realize what I say will mortally offend many in the movement, I believe one of the most disabling kinds of unionism is exemplified by a well-functioning, staff-run local that includes virtually no engaged, well-informed faculty members. There are locals where the faculty are effectively ventriloquists' dummies, parroting staff views without dissent or variation. If such a local has agency fee and a sufficient revenue flow, the staff can often argue for (and sometimes deliver) salary increases, protect benefits, and conduct aggressive grievance hearings.

In such a local--if the office is well managed and efficient and does not squander resources--the faculty need not think about the union. It never moves out of the deep background of their lives. There will of course be a faculty executive committee and local officers. Yet they may stand for election and be replaced every year, so that the officers never really learn what is happening before they are out the door. But they tend in any case to be well indoctrinated; their opinions on all issues are thoroughly scripted by staff. If anything arrives in their mailboxes that might cause them to think differently, they can be relied upon either to ignore its content or simply to discard it unread. Often a staff member is the only person who has regular contact with other locals or with the union's national office. All knowledge of the outside world of collective bargaining is colored by the staff member's interests and shaped by the staff member's perspective. Despite published claims about AAUP unionism, the AAUP is no more guaranteed immunity from this sort of passive faculty unionization than the AFT or the NEA. Whatever the benefits of non-participatory unionization have been in the past--the main one being their facility at freeing up the faculty to pursue their other interests--the main problem is that non-participatory unionization will not be able to adapt to the social activism I believe unions must embrace in the future.

Though instances are rare, staff-dominated unions can also drift into malfeasance. The possibility that absolute power will corrupt absolutely is always there. Some time ago I had experience of one local where the staff was apparently hiring friends or relatives to do makework, and perhaps spending union funds irresponsibly in other ways. The faculty finally rose up and fired the staff, taking over the union and relying on a substantially reduced number of employees to do the routine necessary clerical and administrative work thereafter. The faculty took

control of the union again. With reduced overhead, the local now has the resources to begin building a significant strike fund. You might think it should have been obvious all along that a strike fund was more valuable than two new assistants to the Executive Director, but apparently not.

I am certainly not against having a staff. I am simply against their operating in a vacuum of faculty engagement and in the absence of real oversight and authority. Some graduate employee unions notably limit staff tenure as a way of avoiding power being disproportionately vested in long-term employees. If graduate employee unions--which rely on staff not only for administrative services but also for sustaining collective memory through changing member cohorts--can survive regular staff turnover, so can faculty unions. While local staffing needs and priorities will differ, the issue of staff longevity needs to be on the table for discussion. So does the issue of staff size. There are good reasons to keep union staffs relatively lean.

The issues are somewhat different for a statewide or international union, where a substantial staff is necessary. A local may be able to function with a bare bones staff when an international cannot. There a partnership between leadership and staff, well exemplified by the CFA and only intermittently in evidence at the AAUP, is essential.

A local dominated by a single faculty leader is not, however, necessarily much better than one dominated by a single staff member. Some of the same problems obtain, with most faculty easily becoming disengaged, detached, and ill-informed, and with one person filtering all information. It is entirely possible that a local can be led to act against its own best interests under those conditions. And, of course, like dictatorships, one-man union leaderships often have no capable successor in the wings. Disintegration may be the outcome of the leader's death or departure. In such cases, the only recourse may be for the national office to step in and guarantee the local's continuing operation. Indeed, an inability to generate new generations of local leaders is one reason why locals sometimes become steadily more dependent on a powerful national staff.

The ideal union is thus one where a substantial core of faculty activists remain thoroughly engaged and responsible for setting policy. Policy should grow out of a democratic dialogue among numerous well-informed people. Such a collaborative union is far more likely to be effective in monitoring shared governance, academic freedom in both research and teaching, and the whole range of campus issues for which the staff really does not have day-to-day input, let alone a role in negotiating with the administration. No single faculty member has enough disciplinary or policy expertise to do everything. A core of faculty activists also has a better chance of winning their

colleagues' attention when more active solidarity is necessary. It is also likely that only an engaged faculty can broaden a union's horizons to encompass workplace justice for the community as a whole. Inspiring students to join that cause is also a faculty, not staff, responsibility. Utopian unionization must be an engaged, collective enterprise, not simply an efficiently administered bureaucracy.

I have no illusion that I can easily gain a hearing with the faculty whom I believe most need to hear this message. My most likely audience is those who feel their vested interests lie in resisting everything I am saying. But we have to start somewhere if unions are to lead the way in resisting the relentless corporatization of university culture. There are those of us who believe American education not only needs to retain but actually enhance its capacity to empower students to become critical participants in a democracy. A largely vulnerable and contingent faculty is far less able to voice unpopular views, to resist the reduction of education to job training, and to assert control over the curriculum and faculty hiring. To be effective in the far more challenging managerial regime we face, the faculty needs an organized voice that can negotiate legally enforceable agreements. I believe that voice is called a union.

If such a faculty union has majority membership and a healthy core of activists, it will be able to negotiate with the administration as equals over the key educational issues where the faculty has both interests and expertise. Not all those issues entail opposing every senior administrator. Here and there the corporate university still harbors deans, provosts, chancellors, or presidents who understand and cherish academic freedom. There are even a few who would honor shared governance. A faculty that exercises its will effectively can empower a sympathetic administrator to act.

Yet sympathetic administrators are exceptionally vulnerable today. Governing Boards seek aggressive managers intolerant of democracy's complications. Administrators who truly endorse academic freedom may feel seriously isolated amongst their own cohort. The social pressures among senior administrators to conform to a managerial model are substantial. Faculty affection and support may limit overt attack by unsympathetic administrators on their peers but not covert campaigns to undermine a "disloyal" dean, provost, or president. Just consider how exposed and isolated an administrator who endorses collective bargaining would be today on a typical non-CB campus. I have no solution to offer, just a warning: a lone progressive administrator may not be able to survive in the contemporary corporate university.

Despite the crude character of a good administrator/ bad administrator distinction, it remains useful and

necessary in many contexts. You have to know who your friends are. What this dichotomy misses, however, is the structural character of higher education governance. We all decry the proliferation of a managerial class of administrators peopled by those who have either never spent time in a classroom or have long forgotten the experience. What we may miss is the coercive character of social relations in this expanded group and the impact managerial socialization has on faculty organizing. These people are trained to resist unionization and then, if they fail, to help ensure you become a business union, rather than a broadly progressive social force. Excessive numbers of administrators facilitates their collective conformity to these goals. They work together. They breed together. They cultivate their faculty allies, reward them, and incorporate them into collateral socialization processes.

During the first two decades of my career I regularly worked closely with senior administrators, many of whom were dedicated to improving the whole range of disciplines on campus. Then in the 1990s the upper administration joined with the Association of Governing Boards in the belief that advocates of collective bargaining should be barred from shared governance roles. A corporate logic began to take over the central administration, and "unprofitable" humanities disciplines lost the core of their support. My preference is still to collaborate with the administration, but not when senior members committed to academic freedom are absent.

In that environment an enlightened administrator, however vulnerable, is to be treasured. On my own campus a sympathetic chancellor was able to grant graduate employees bargaining rights a few years ago --against the wishes of most other campus administrators--in response to a building occupation following a vote for recognition. That application of force gave her warrant to act decisively. Reasoned argument had failed to win the day for twelve years, though it had certainly educated people and prepared the ground. But collective agency and activism was required to close the deal. Afterwards, that chancellor was essentially run out of town by conservative administrators and alumni.

Similarly, faculty need activism from time to time to build alliances across the moats dividing disciplines. A faculty union that goes more than a generation without a strike can lose sight of its potential for solidarity. A strike in support not only of faculty interests but also of principled employment for the whole campus community could create good will for a decade or more. How might an enlightened faculty union transform higher education into an industry devoted to social justice? A socially responsible humanities and social science curriculum, partly developed with union funds, might for example engage an instrumentalized university mission critically. It could examine all the economic practices that structure a student's education.

Too many campuses at present amount to instructional manuals for workplace exploitation. Teaching by example, they show students how to break employee morale, destroy families, withhold basic rights, and deny self-representation. As Richard Shaull put it in 1994, "There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes . . . the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (34).

When Yale University historically fired many of its workers during the summer, rather than assigning them to other tasks--a practice that turned long-term employees into seasonal workers who could be rehired year after year while being denied benefits (Wilhelm)--it constructed its students as participants in class oppression. Now all who benefit from the exploitation of contingent teachers are complicit in a system founded on injustice. As Marc Bousquet has shown us in his account of the University of Louisville's ruthless partnership with UPS, some universities have found new ways of turning undergraduates into disposable workers. To grasp how intricately the contemporary university can brutalize both students and teachers, one has to read the "Students Are Already Workers" chapter in Bousquet's How the University Works. The Louisville students do back-breaking work at the UPS sorting hub from midnight to 3 or 4 am, all for wages of roughly \$120 a week. Then faculty, who also teach classes during the day, show up to advise them as they come off the line in the middle of the night. As the corporate university has evolved over the last twenty years, it now exploits both teachers and students in the workplace. That is a new configuration for higher education, and unions need to instruct all of us in its modes of operation and to take the lead in resisting its human costs.

I am not suggesting that a union negotiate with the university about the overall curriculum. I am suggesting that a union comprehensively educate the faculty about the campus employment environment, support the faculty's right to teach about such matters, develop educational materials for students and faculty, and fund course development in this area for interested faculty. The institution's employment practices are relevant to every student in every class, no matter what the subject matter. Academic freedom means that faculty members can take some modest amount of time to raise such issues in any class they teach. That much can be reinforced in a faculty handbook or union contract.

While classrooms take up such issues, the union should stand behind all campus workers. Whenever possible, it should not only endorse but also help organize all employee groups. It should be an advocate for all

groups, whether or not it represents them in collective bargaining. On those campuses where the administration has partnered in exploiting undergraduate workers, unions have a special responsibility to publicize the fact and seek reform. Even a non-unionized private university faculty could take on these tasks. Certainly any AAUP chapter could do so. It would not hurt for parents to see faculty unions as, for example, defenders of their children.

Organizing drives would also benefit from recasting and expanding the social profile of unionization, not only because it would have wider appeal but also because it would be harder to resist. A card drive advocating comprehensive workplace justice would be significantly more difficult to misrepresent. At the very least, the arguments against "a living wage and health care coverage for all campus workers" and "fair representation for the faculty in shaping the curriculum" would be more vulnerable.

Those faculty leaders who forged unions decades ago understood themselves to be joining a cause. If successors have often not stepped forward to fill their shoes, it is not surprising. Maintaining an ongoing organization is hardly equivalent to jousting with dragons to establish one. Meanwhile, many unions since have sold themselves on the basis of disengagement: "Give us your dues, and we'll take care of business. You'll be free to concentrate on teaching and research." Yet we do not need to galvanize all our members to reinvigorate unions with a sense of mission. We need to inspire a core of activists in every local, to put forth a new, more generous, cause around which faculty unions can mobilize and recruit new members. Such efforts may also require a triggering event, like a freeze on unrepresented workers' salaries. Unions are not prevented from advocating on behalf of workers they do not formally represent. Meanwhile, the conceptual ground can be established in advance.

The changes I am advocating are partly a recovery project. They challenge unions to recover their historic devotion to the public good, while articulating it to new times and conditions. Faculty unionization as a vehicle for narrow self-interest has no future. We need to envision a day when people outside the academy look to a unionized faculty with admiration, when they see a union as the single most enlightened and democratic force on campus. We are a long way from the dawn of that day, but its fundamental elements are not unimaginable. Principle itself is not outside the boundaries of faculty identity. It just needs to be deepened, expanded, rethought, and applied anew. Faculty unionization now has a long enough history for us to realize that campus unions, like all other cultural and political institutions, need to be continually strengthened and regularly rebuilt and reconceived. We have now reached that time. If the faculty can lead the way to recovering public faith in unions, they will indeed have done due diligence for the country as a whole.

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